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Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 07-34-159
Week of August 20, 2007

ADDING VALUE TO THE MUSTARD CAPITAL

Proponents of a new mustard mill in Gravelbourg are hoping to build on Saskatchewan's title as mustard capital of the world.

The province is the world's second-largest producer of mustard, and the largest exporter. The majority of the crop is processed elsewhere.

That will start to change when commercial production begins at Mustard Capital Inc.'s dry milling facility in Gravelbourg later this month.

"We've got a unique and innovative mill that we are just finalizing and getting ready for production," said Mustard Capital Inc. (MCI) CEO Tom Halpenny. "Our mill will use all three types of mustard – yellow, brown and oriental – and it will produce a wide range of products, including blends of the three varieties."

Dry milling is the process of fractioning mustard seed into its three components – bran, flour and oil.

MCI is one of only two dry mustard millers in Canada, but holds one key advantage over the other dry mill in Hamilton, Ontario: MCI's plant is smack dab in the middle of the globe's leading mustard producer.

"That's an advantage, absolutely," Halpenny said. "Being physically close to the producer is important. We want to work closely with farmers to develop that supply chain all the way to the end users."

Canadian mustard production didn't start until the 1930s, and didn't really begin in Saskatchewan until the 1950s. However, today the province grows 90 per cent of Canadian production and nearly half the world's production.

Unfortunately, Saskatchewan's mustard processing has not enjoyed the same level of dominance.

"Well, it does take some expertise before you can have the confidence to enter the marketplace. Because it's an oilseed, milling mustard is not really a simple process," Halpenny said.

"MCI is fortunate to have someone working with us who has multiple years in the mustard industry, so that's one of the things that gave us the confidence to proceed and enter the marketplace."

The plant has the potential to process 15,000 tonnes per year, but Halpenny says production levels will be increased based on the market.

"We are looking to have an overall production volume that will be scaleable, depending on the market demand more than anything, but there are other factors like the number of the shifts that we will be operating," he stated.

Halpenny says the most obvious use for mustard is the food industry, which is where MCI will be focusing most of its attention for the time being.

"Mustard is the most heavily traded spice in the world, and mustard products are used in many of the foods you will find in your fridge besides the jar of yellow stuff," he said. "Mayonnaise, ketchup and barbeque sauces will use it. It's often used in the meat industry as a binder for things like hot dogs and other prepared meats."

But Halpenny is quick to add that there are a number of emerging markets for mustard beyond the dinner table, including bio-pesticides and biodiesel.

"It has a very wide application, and we think we can expand on that potential with some of our products that incorporate non-traditional uses for mustard," he said.

"We think there are a lot of opportunities beyond the food industry."

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DISTILLERS GRAINS COULD PROVIDE BOOST TO BEEF INDUSTRY

With the rapid increase in ethanol production in Western Canada, dried distillers grains with solubles (DDGS) could become a very popular – and beneficial – feed supplement for beef cattle.

Saskatchewan ethanol plants will have the capacity to produce approximately 170 million litres of ethanol and 150,000 tonnes of wheat-based DDGS this year.

DDGS are the co-product of the ethanol distilling process. After the cereal grain has been fermented and the ethanol distilled and extracted, DDGS is what remains.

"During distillation, most of the fermentable carbohydrates, which are in the starch, are extracted. Left over is a co-product which contains high levels of fat, protein and digestible fibre," said Dr. Bart Lardner, Senior Research Scientist with the Western Beef Development Centre.

"This co-product appears to be a high-quality energy and protein supplement for beef cows."

Lardner says that DDGS provides a real opportunity to enhance cattle feed in a low-quality forage situation.

"The protein and nutrients in DDGS are concentrated, so what you get is a high level of protein availability and a high level of energy availability from this co-product," he stated.

"Typically, a beef cow's diet is mostly roughage, and, at some points, it's possible to feed a low-quality diet which would largely be crop residue or straw, for example. DDGS could supplement any deficiencies in energy or protein very well, and bring up these nutrient levels."

Lardner says there is potentially less digestive upsets when feeding distillers grains. In beef cows, when the diet changes rapidly from high-roughage to high-grain, there can be negative digestive effects due to the shift in the microbial population.

However, feeding DDGS provides needed carbohydrates without the depression in forage digestion. In this case, producers will not see a change in microbial population because the energy is not from starch, but from these highly digestible fibres.

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The distillation process also concentrates a variety of minerals, specifically phosphorous, potassium and sulphur. Therefore, producers supplementing their cows' diets with DDGS are also feeding more of these minerals to the animals.

DDGS is currently priced to match the market rates for barley. However, as more ethanol plants start production, its availability will start to increase.

"As supply ramps up and companies begin looking to get rid of the DDGS, they will have to start pricing it accordingly, and it should start coming down on a cost per tonne basis," Lardner said.

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INCREASING DEMAND FOR FLAX FIBRE

It's pretty amazing stuff. You can wear it. You can build with it. You can insulate your house with it. However, here in Saskatchewan, where we grow oilseed flax, little of the straw is used for processing.

Alvin Ulrich, the president of Biolin Research, is trying to change that through his work as the director of Crop Fibres Canada, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Saskatchewan Flax Development Commission.

Crop Fibres Canada is a pilot plant, testing and resource facility for straw processing and fibre and shive (the non-fibre portion of the flax stem) production. Ulrich says they are currently working on ways to capitalize on the growing demand for flax fibre.

"People are going back to natural fibres and they are looking for a stronger fibre for industrial applications," said Ulrich.

The flax fibre pilot project is partially funded by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's Agriculture Development Fund through its contribution to Flax Canada 2015, a federal initiative aimed at developing the added value potential of flax. This year, there is a cluster of flax producers in the Hepburn and Redvers areas involved in the project.

Ulrich says there are some new procedures to follow in order to maximize the value of the fibre in the straw rather than just picking up what comes from the back of the combine.

"Last year, with most of the farmers, we were able to use a stripper/header. It just strips the seed off the plant so that the straw is standing as tall as possible. Then we got some rollers and rolled it several times. That breaks off the straw in long pieces and gets it flat on the ground," he noted.

"When we get rain, all of the pieces get a chance to get wet, and all of the pieces are touching the ground. As a result, the microbes in the soil have an easy chance to colonize the pieces of straw, so they start growing on the straw and start decomposing it."

These extra steps may be part of the reason why the flax fibre industry has yet to take off, despite the fact that Saskatchewan produces 70 per cent of the Canadian crop.

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"[Flax is] often the last crop planted in the spring. It's often the last crop harvested because it can over-winter, so it tends to get pushed off to the end, and often, at the end of season, producers just want to get done and they may not want to fuss around with any extra steps," Ulrich said.

Ulrich hopes that the net result of the work at the Crop Fibres Canada facility will be targeted end-uses for the fibre, with enough margin to be able to pay farmers to do more in the field to maximize the value of the straw, or even to be able to pay a processor to do it for them.

"We may be able to come up with a system where it is the processing plant that will do those extra operations. The farmer might receive less money, but won't have to do the extra work. That would make the farmer happy, make the processor happy, and make everybody happy," he stated.

"That's the challenge – how do we get that first model plant up and working?" Ulrich says that's the key to getting out of the catch-22 that currently holds the industry back. Producers won't grow more flax for fibre without a processing plant, but investors aren't going to put up the $5 million to $10 million necessary to build a processing plant unless producers are growing more flax for fibre.

However, Ulrich is positive about the future of flax fibre.

"We have more and more overseas customers who are interested in what we are doing and interested in investing. They wouldn't be here if there weren't some promising results," he noted.

"There is no doubt we are seeing a growing interest. I am very positive it will happen. I'm just not certain when it will happen."

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CROP-CONNECT OFFERS CONVENIENT CROP INSURANCE MANAGEMENT

The Saskatchewan Crop Insurance Corporation (SCIC) has developed a website aimed at providing Saskatchewan producers with a convenient and efficient way to manage their crop insurance contracts.

Created in 2003, CropConnect is a free service that gives producers online access to their personal contract information. From the comfort of their own homes, producers can complete the various forms and applications necessary for crop insurance coverage.

"Throughout the year, we ask our customers to supply us with some of their farming data to fulfill their contract commitments," said Trilby Henderson, Communications and Information Specialist with SCIC.

"By using CropConnect, producers are able to complete these tasks online instead of dealing with the paper copies or by coming into the office."

Enrolling with CropConnect allows producers to complete personal premium and coverage calculations, enter and view their annual endorsement selections, and view their land claim and yield history. They are also able to complete seeded acreage reports, make personalized production declarations and update their demographic information.

"The site gives producers the opportunity to view the selections they have made and keeps track of their history so that they can retrieve all of that information instantly by signing into the program," Henderson said. "By accessing the information, producers are able to make better management decisions."

"At certain times of the year, many producers might not be able to get in to see us, but they are able to complete the elements required under their crop insurance contracts by going online. This allows the service to fit in with their schedules."

CropConnect benefits Saskatchewan producers in several ways. "The main advantage of using this service is convenience. The site is also a time saver, allowing producers to stay on top of the insurance program requirements from the comfort of their own homes," Henderson stated.

SCIC also follows a strict privacy policy, so producers can be assured that their personal information is well protected.

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As part of their ongoing commitment to customer service, SCIC is continuously looking for new features to add to the website.

Henderson says that SCIC is always ready to help producers who prefer the one-on-one interaction of a meeting. However, there are certain busy periods during the year when the offices are extremely active with walk-in traffic, and delays can sometimes occur.

"CropConnect helps to minimize and contain this active period," she noted. "So if producers are just looking for a quick way to complete these forms and they don't need the extra help, they might really enjoy this service."

Any producers interested in enrolling with CropConnect can contact the CropConnect help desk at 1-800-422-1943. All they require is an active e-mail address and the legal name on their crop insurance contract. Customers can enrol in the program any time during the year.

Producers will then be given a temporary password, and will be able to select their own personal password upon accessing the program.

Visit www.saskcropinsurance.com for more information.

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PATIENCE CRUCIAL FOR MAXIMIZING CANOLA CROP

It's a gamble every year, timing out when the canola crop has turned to maximize your yield.

The task might be more difficult than usual this year, but a little patience can pay off with more canola in the bin.

Saskatchewan agronomy specialist David Vanthuyne from the Canola Council of Canada says this growing season will present even more of a challenge than usual. Vanthuyne says growing conditions will see many canola fields mature at different stages, and advises growers to stay off the swather until sufficient seed colour change has occurred in the crop.

The challenge is that crops don't come with a best before date, or a "time to harvest" indicator, he noted. As a result, averaging out seed colour change on a number of plants in several locations within a given field will be the most profitable approach this year.

"We've extended the swathing recommendation window to up to 60 per cent seed colour change from our old recommendation of 30 to 40 per cent," Vanthuyne said. "Unfortunately, variations in maturity in many areas this year will make determining when to swath more difficult."

As a result, he adds that proper staging of the crop will be critical.

"Some plants may be at 60 to 70 per cent seed colour change, while others may only be at 20 to 30 per cent seed colour change," Vanthuyne said. "The trick is to capture as much yield as possible by delaying swathing long enough, avoiding shattering losses, but allowing as much seed colour change as possible on less mature plants."

When seeds in the bottom half of the plant have changed colour, seeds in the top, or last-formed pods, will be firm and roll between the fingertips. At this stage of maturity, Vanthuyne says the risk of locking in green seed can be minimized.

To be considered sufficiently "colour changed," green seeds must have at least small patches of colour or spotting. Seeds slowly turn from green to light yellow or reddish-brown to black, depending on the weather and variety. Seed colour change within pods on the main stem will advance about 10 per cent every two to three days under normal environmental conditions.

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Under normal growing conditions, sampling the field every two to three days and averaging the percentage of seed colour change will give growers an accurate assessment of the overall maturity of the crop. Plant densities, soil type, topography, variety choice, and weather will affect the rate of seed maturation.

Vanthuyne says it's a good idea to walk out and sample at least five plants in different areas of the field. Some varieties will show pod colour change long before the seeds do, while the opposite can also hold true. That's why it is important for producers to check for seed colour change, not pod colour change.

To catch most of the crop at or near the optimum stage, Vanthuyne notes that growers with large acreages may need to start swathing their earliest maturing fields prior to 40 per cent in order to maintain an average seed colour change of 40 to 60 per cent for the bulk of the crop.

Hot, dry and windy weather can also cause rapid seed moisture loss and seed colour change. "We've seen seeds on the main stem change from 10 per cent to 50 per cent in just a few days under these conditions," Vanthuyne cautioned.

"Patience and averaging seed colour change will be the key this year."

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